

# Issues of inclusivity for online distance learners: an academic learning support perspective

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**Abstract** Inclusivity is one form of educational integrity that is enshrined as an abiding principle in higher education irrespective of mode of delivery or educational program. In course provision, it might take the form of providing equal access to diverse groups of learners. In on-campus contexts, systems are in place to ensure (not unproblematically) that inclusivity is practised. Distance learners, because of their various commitments and the diverse competence and skills they bring to their studies, are a highly heterogeneous group. 'Inclusivity' in this context could have different meanings. In the present paper, we interpret the term 'inclusivity' to mean greater access and support to students, regardless of their learning contexts. In order to explore ways of enabling access to academic learning support we have explored the ODL literature to uncover how academic support services are envisioned in the literature (if at all), and to imagine how an academic learning support initiative within a program/subject might be conceived to contribute to better outcomes for online distance students.

## Key Ideas

- ODL literature often treats learning support as a small subset of "learner support", which includes technical and other advice to learners;
- Learning support is often constructed as the provision of generic and/or remedial resources or interventions;
- Models which address ODL individual learners as well as groups in both proactive and reactive ways appear to hold the most potential for learning support, but these also draw heaviest on institutional resources.

**Discussion question 1** What unique challenges are there in providing academic learning support to online distance students?

**Discussion question 2** What models or principles are there which might address these challenges?

## 1 Introduction

Online distance learning (ODL) continues to grow in popularity. Harasim (2000) argues that the telecommunications revolution has been the greatest revolution in the last century, resulting in profound changes in higher education. She asserts that:

At the turn of the 21st century, public discourse is beginning to recognise the implications of this educational transformation. There has been a sea change in attitudes, a phenomenal level of investment, and a frenzy of (often unrealistic) expectations despite the (often glacial) progress in changing institutional and pedagogical strategies. (Harasim, 2000: 59)

With regard to ODL, Gladieux (2000) suggests that the changes are rapid and sweeping: "[w]riting anything about information technology and distance learning these days is at risk of being outdated before anyone can read it" (Gladieux, 2000: 21). Two recent surveys of North American tertiary institutions found that 66% of those institutions offer some form of distance education (Parsad & Lewis, 2008), and that the growth in online enrolments (almost four million students in 2008) represents an increase of 12.9% from 2007-8 in comparison with an increase of just 1.2% in the overall higher education student population (Allen & Seaman, 2008). This increase has been attributed to a variety of factors, including issues of finance, flexibility (Allen & Seaman, 2008) and access (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Although this research is based solely on data from North America, literature around the world attests to the popularity of the "virtual university". For example, Harasim (2009) notes that most higher education institutions in developed nations offer programs incorporating blended and/or online distance learning. It appears clear that ODL is "no longer peripheral or supplementary; it has become an integral part of mainstream society" (ibid., p. 59).

Adapting to the technologies and contexts of ODL may call for a shift in paradigm for those working in the field of academic learning support. Perhaps the biggest challenge the ICT revolution imposes is "how to level the playing field so that the technology revolution opens doors to all students, regardless of advantage" (Gladieux, 2000, 21). The present study reviews the literature to examine how best to create a level playing field with regard to academic learning support in ODL. It begins by taking into account who the learners are in an online setting. It then outlines the principles governing online learning that relate to the principle of inclusivity, followed by an analysis of the notion of "learner support" in the ODL literature. Recent perspectives on learning support are then presented, from both ODL literature and general academic learning support literature. The paper ends by examining one model of support that translates face-to-face academic support in an ODL context and suggests that online one-on-one consultations be recognised as a valuable mode for enhancing online learning and making inclusivity possible.

## **2 ODL learners: Characteristics and issues**

As universities expand their geographical reach, the distinction between the demographics of on-campus and online-distance learners decreases. Tait (2000) suggests that an investigation of who our students are is the starting point for planning support. Researchers at major ODL universities such as Open University United Kingdom (OUUK) have attempted to define who their learners actually are. Research from OUUK has identified interesting changes in student demographics over time. OUUK was conceived in 1971 to provide undergraduate education to mature-aged learners who might otherwise have no access to a university education (Tait, 2003; Johnson & Barrett, 2003). Now it offers both undergraduate and postgraduate education to an increasing student population, 20% of whom are under 25; meaning that it is in direct competition with other universities for the school-leaver market (Kelly & Mills, 2007).

However, typically, in the literature, a student who chooses to study in an ODL context is likely to be living in a geographically remote area; may have work

commitments that conflict with campus timetables; may be involved in taking care of children, the elderly or the sick; or may find that the courses they seek are not offered in institutions close by (Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Whereas it was once assumed that distance education was for "highly motivated and resourceful autodidacts disadvantaged by distance" (Ryan, 2001, p. 71), it is now recognised that distance learners bring with them a wide range of needs, skills and expectations (ibid.; cf. also Tait, 2000). Statistics on the exact demographics of online distance learners are not easy to access, but given the characteristics above, it is safe to assume that diversity in terms socio-economic status, literacy levels, culture, gender and degree of comfort with technology is likely to be the norm.

As noted by Ryan (2001) above, institutional expectations of learners in distance courses may be based more on assumptions than evidence. It has been noted that many distance learners may be:

    faced with a new learning environment and the expectation that they will have independent learning skills and the capacity to engage in activities that require self direction and self management of learning. (McLoughlin & Marshall (2000: 1; cited in Dzakiria, 2008: 103)

Such unsupported assumptions are often seen as factors which may result in students discontinuing their studies. Student attrition is a major issue in ODL (Morgan & McKenzie, 2003; Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). This is directly linked to a sense of isolation (Dzakiria, 2008; Tait & Mills, 2001, in Morgan and McKenzie, 2003; Bennett, Priest & Macpherson, 1999, in Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Bird and Morgan (2003) have cited numerous studies that have identified the following factors which are implicated in a student's decision of whether or not to continue in ODL programs: work and family commitments; financial strain; readiness for independent learning; availability of timely support with academic skills; accessibility and user-friendly administrative and academic support; user-friendly content; explicit assessment tasks; individual motivation; ease with technology; language, literacy and learning disability issues, impact of previous learning experiences; and support from significant others. Two major factors contributing to learner attrition are feelings of isolation and the lack of self-directed learning skills (Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). As can be seen from the survey of the literature, there are several issues that impact on a learner in an online context. As academic skills and language advisors, our concerns primarily relate to the development of independent learning and academic language and literacy. The next section defines learning support and outlines some dimensions of it that relate to the role of learning support staff.

### **3 Defining and providing learning support**

#### **3.1 How learning support is defined and addressed in the literature**

In the ODL literature there is a strong sense that academic learning support is either a service that is expected of the subject tutor, or it is provided as generic resources or interventions in reaction to "special" student needs; that is, student support is seen as "a peripheral, not a core service" (Rumble, 2000: 220).

Following Potter (1998), Ryan (2001) argues that many learners have special needs at different times during their study. We would argue further that a combination of reactive (remedial) and proactive (developmental) measures (Kelly & Mills, 2007; Atkins, Beard, Kelly, et al., 2009) offers the best chance of providing successful student support in general, and academic learning support in particular, though such an approach is not without its difficulties, as noted in the following section.

Although the ODL research has included both calls for learning support materials and instruction to be integrated into subject delivery (e.g., Rossiter & Waters, 2000; cited in Ryan, 2001), there are several examples of generic interventions (e.g., Johnson & Barrett, 2003; Phillips, 2003), which can only partially address learners' needs. It is only more recently that faculty, learning support and other providers have attempted to grapple with learning support issues in a way which might benefit all learners, rather than those identified as having special needs (e.g., Phillips, 2003; Hussin, 2007; Goodfellow & Lea, 2008; MacDonald, 2008; Atkins, Beard, Kelly et al., 2009).

Much of the ODL literature deals with academic learning support under the general banner of "learner support". Several authors note that attempts to investigate learner support are linked to attempts to reduce the high attrition rate of ODL learners, estimated to be approximately 50% (Tait, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 2003). In much of the literature, the term "learning support" has not been clearly unpacked to identify different elements of learning that may require scaffolding. Some (e.g., Tait, 2004) have enumerated the following:

- the need to have activity in support of the learning that grows from the student as well as from the subject or course;
- the need to acknowledge the vulnerability of adult students in terms of the support of study skills, and to boost and sustain confidence; in other words to recognise the affective dimension of study;
- the need to provide personal individual support in order to do all this;
- and finally the need to offer this not only on a course by course basis but throughout the student's university study; the so-called "continuity of concern" (Tait, 2004: 5).

Although Tait (2004) explicitly ascribes this "educational counselling" role to a subject content tutor, this function, in current practice, is likely to be fulfilled by academic learning staff. This presents challenges for staff such as learning advisors in ODL contexts, where the learning cohorts generally include diverse groups of learners. The following section examines two frameworks (Tait, 2000; Thorpe, 2003) that many studies have referred to and have come to represent important principles guiding the delivery of learning support in ODL contexts.

### **3.2 Frameworks for learning support in ODL<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> While we have focused on generally-accepted or popular models of learner support, those interested in an Asian perspective (given the focus of the current conference) are directed to a special issue of Distance Education edited by Baggaley (2007).

Tait's (2000) model of the functions of learner support provides a comprehensive taxonomy of support for learners from pre-course to post-graduation. Tait (2000; cf. also Rumble, 2000) provides three primary functions of student support:

1. cognitive: supporting and developing learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources for individual students;
2. affective: providing an environment which supports students, creates commitment, and enhances self-esteem; and
3. systemic: establishing administrative processes and information management systems which are effective, transparent and overall student-friendly. (Tait, 2000: 289)

Services identified by Tait range from pre-study advisory services, during-study library, ICT, counselling, academic advice and other support services, and post-study career guidance. To this list of services, we would like to add advice on academic language and literacies and the development of independent study skills.

The overarching focus on cognitive, affective and systemic factors influencing ODL highlights potentially conflicting areas or paradoxes (such as a university's need for stable administrative systems and the high level of flexibility required for ODL to be successful), as well as areas of support which, without explicit attention, are otherwise assumed by tutors, adding to their burdensome workloads (Morgan & McKenzie, 2003).

Thorpe (2003) provides a model for collaborative online learning, informed by a strong constructivist approach (cf. also Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003), where the curriculum is negotiated between the tutor and the students. Thorpe argues that:

[t]raditionally, learner support is seen as that which happens after the course materials have been made. Its function is usually defined as enabling learners to study successfully and to develop their own understandings of the field ... Such boundaries, however, no longer hold in on-line courses where collaborative learning plays a major role. (p. 199)

In such a negotiated curriculum, learner support is "no longer an add-on to a predefined course, but itself defines what the course becomes" (ibid.). Rather than highlighting systemic issues, Thorpe's (2003) model of learning support focuses on response and responsiveness, with regard to *identity*, *time/duration* and *interaction*. A focus on identity is envisaged to take into account a learner's role in an online environment as both an individual and a member of a group. It also takes into account the learners' cultural context which influences their interaction. With regard to time and duration, Thorpe notes that support is a "live" and dynamic process. This focus has an influence on decisions regarding feedback, which, whether synchronous or asynchronous, has ongoing effects on the process of learning. It should be noted that research has identified pedagogical and practical advantages and disadvantages of both synchronous and asynchronous communication in distance education (cf. the collection by Moore, 2007, for example). Interpersonal interaction involves learning support in "addressing the needs of learners *in the terms in which those learners wish to*

*express themselves*" (p. 203, emphasis in original). Such a model challenges the effectiveness of generic and, to a certain extent, proactive interventions. It also requires a stronger focus on the provision of tailored individual support, which must be balanced against institutional resources.

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### 3.3 Recent approaches to academic learning support

#### 3.3.1 Study skills, academic socialisation and academic literacies

Three approaches to academic language and learning support have been identified in the literature under the broad headings of a "study skills" model, an "academic socialisation" model, and an "academic literacies" model (Lea & Street, 1998). The differences between these approaches are summarised in Table 1:

**Table 1. Models of student writing in higher education (based on Lea & Street, 1998: 172).**

	<b>Study Skills model</b>	<b>Academic socialisation model</b>	<b>Academic literacies model</b>
<b>construction of the major issue</b>	student deficit	acculturation of students into academic discourse	students' negotiation of conflicting literacy practices
<b>interpretation of "student writing"</b>	technical and instrumental skill	a transparent medium of socialisation	construction/negotiation of meaning.
<b>focus of intervention</b>	remediation; distinct skills; language; grammar	induction into a homogenous academic "culture"; deep, surface, strategic learning	literacies as social practices; meaning making; identity; genres; linguistic practices.
<b>underlying theory</b>	behavioural/ experimental psychology	social psychology, constructivism	critical discourse analysis; systemic functional linguistics; genre theory

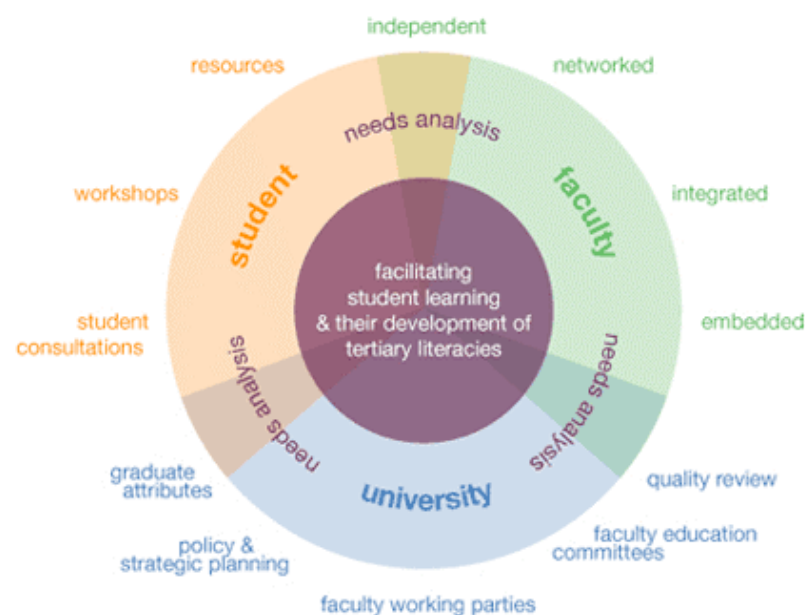
Each model has its place in the provision of learning support, and implications for how related issues are dealt with. Although three 'models' have been proposed as distinct approaches, Lea & Street argue that they can inform each other. For example, student plagiarism has come to be seen more as a complex issue influenced by student competencies and somewhat variable disciplinary and institutional practices, rather than as an issue of individual student misconduct (Chanock, 2003; McGowan, 2005). Responses to student plagiarism may be dealt

with by teaching students skills of acknowledgement practice and referencing. However, that in itself may not be sufficient. In order to enable students to make informed choices about the use of citation practices in the discipline, orienting students to the “discourse” of the discipline is necessary. Pedagogy pertaining to plagiarism avoidance needs to move from the level of skills to acculturation. This too may not be adequate. An understanding of citation practices in disciplines is required to negotiate academic or institutional practices in one’s writing. Although surface-level skills may be supported by the provision of generic materials to ODL students, interpersonal negotiation of individual and institutional perspectives may be more appropriate for the development of a critical awareness suggested by the academic socialisation and academic literacies models.

### 3.3.2 Learning development model of practice

Another model (below) puts student learning and development of tertiary literacies at the centre of academic learning support attempts to be inclusive of the needs of various stakeholders. Figure 1 below represents an overview of an on-campus learning development model adopted by the University of Wollongong.

**Figure 1. Learning development model of practice (Percy et al., 2004).**



With a focus on student learning, this model incorporates interaction between academic learning support staff and students, faculty academics and institutional committees. Generic materials are provided to students both online and in-print. Opportunities to interact with learning developers are available through generic workshops and individual consultations. A major focus with faculty academics is

embedding learning-focused activities into curricula, as well as providing workshops tailored to current assessment tasks. This work is commonly undertaken within first-year (undergraduate and postgraduate) core subjects and in transition courses.

Although the model can be effective in an on-campus context (e.g., Skillen et al. 1999), the durability of measures to integrate learning-focused activities into a curriculum can be affected by curriculum and staff changes (Walker et al., 2008). Although the model affords both proactive and reactive interventions, often it is only possible to provide a reactive intervention that focuses on some learners' needs and not those of the larger group. Given these challenges of providing equal access in the on-campus environment, translating such a model into an online environment may pose further problems because of issues related to being responsive to particular learners and learning environments..

### 3.3.3 Responsive learning environments

A pedagogic proposal to enhance on-line teaching through designing responsive learning environments is offered by Hicks, Reid and George (2001). They suggest that the online environment calls for a rethink of traditional learning needs of students. The concepts of embeddedness and consistency are advocated as possible dimensions to link on-line materials to students needs. Highly embedded and consistent support material can positively affect chances of reaching larger numbers of learners in an ODL context is their reasonable claim.

The authors (ibid.) further reconceptualise the generic, parallel/adjunct and integrated approaches in an online learning environment. However, there is a glaring omission of the individual, one-on-one approach, which on campus is an important mode of scaffolding learning. While the three approaches tabled below are proactive and valuable to online learning, we argue in the next section that the individual, one-to-one online support has a huge potential to afford not just the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning, but could also productively create an inclusive learning atmosphere where the individual might be made to feel valued thereby minimising the tyranny of distance for the learner.

**Table 2: Summary of approaches to student learning support in an on-line learning environment (Hicks et al., 2001)**

Approaches	Characteristics	Advantages	Disadvantages
<i>Generic</i>	Stand alone cross and institutional applicability	Can be used by students from a range of universities; Can be applied on a more institution-wide basis; Can be embedded at point of need; Little maintenance	Not consistent with content and processes of subject; Often too general without specific detail required; Little possibility for professional development
<i>Parallel/Adjunct</i>	Closely aligned with the subject/course; Developed in parallel	Specifically focuses on particular groups of students, subjects and/or courses; Can be embedded at point of need; Saves effort on the	Only useful if task is generic; May be misleading if terms and ideas used in highly specific ways; Some maintenance required



		part of the academic	
<i>Integrated</i>	Close collaboration between teaching staff; Totally seamless with subject	Fully contextualized; Seamless for student; Staff member engages in developmental processes, providing significant learning opportunities	Relies on collaboration between teaching staff and support staff; Labour intensive; Significant maintenance required

Generic resources are materials that are created to provide a broad introduction to certain academic genres, and are developed to provide the learner with a general model of how various texts might be written (Hicks et al, 2001). Useful as these resources are, they are only effective as a process through which students can be socialised into the practices of the general academic discourse. Such an approach definitely provides study skills support by focusing on distinct language and literacy, but it does not allow for a negotiation or construction of meaning in the learner's discipline.

Parallel and Adjunct modes of providing support may be more inclusive as they focus on the needs of groups of learners (Hicks *et al.*, 2001). Through these modes, learners may be provided timely support with assessments. It is possible to construct activities that are student-to-student and student-teacher focused so that students get the opportunity to interact with others to negotiate and engage in the social practices of the discourse of the discipline.

Hicks *et al* (2001) compellingly argue that integrated resources can potentially provide greater opportunities for embedding academic literacy within the context of the discipline, by being seamlessly welded into the delivery of the subject. The study skills required in the subject and the socialisation into the language of the discipline can be completely blended. To add to this, a well designed online subject/course makes its assessments explicit and the disciplinary expectation very clear so that all students benefit from it.

### **3.3.4 Including online one-on-one support in the repertoire**

Hicks et al.'s approach (2001) overlooks the potential for one-on-one consultation in academic support. One-on-one consultations are a powerful way of enhancing student learning. It must be remembered that ODL contexts aim to provide access to education to students who may bring with them different learning experiences. This presents challenges of catering to greater diversity in terms of literacy levels, cultural and linguistic variables and various vulnerabilities - technological and other. The students in a cohort could be mature age students with no prior formal education, for example. For these groups one way to provide support is by scaffolding the learning and meaningfully integrating the cognitive and affective functions that Tait (2000: 289; see above) posits. Besides, if the key characteristics of student support are integration of support in assessment, the importance of timeliness when teaching and learning are asynchronous and the centrality of direct personal feedback (Tait, 2003), then individual, one-on-one consultation needs to be considered seriously as an approach to online academic learning support. On campus, students seek one-on-one consultations at critical points of writing assessments and learning. Effective interaction on a one-on-one basis with an experienced learning advisor who provides the necessary scaffolding may be one solution to the attrition problem discussed earlier.

This very important mode of learning needs to be modified to suit the online environment. We have extended Hicks et al.'s (2001) table to plot the salient features of the individual one-on-one consultation approach to outline possible advantages and disadvantages in an ODL context.

**Table 3: An individual approach (after Hicks et al., 2001)**

Approaches	Characteristics	Advantages	Disadvantages
<i>Individual, one-on-one consultation</i>	Close collaboration with students; Potential to address specific needs	Timely; Student-centred; Possibility of customising support; Minimise feelings of isolation by creating appropriate student-teacher relationship	Constructed as 'remedial'; Time/labour intensive; Not all learning advisors are prepared to do it; Protocols for it are not yet well established; Ways creating an inclusive environment not well explored (student-student or student-teacher)

One-on-one consultation has been associated with "remedial" rather than "developmental" learning. It is generally perceived within the university as a form of editing support (Woodward Kron, 2007). This view needs to be revised because it is evident from a practitioner's perspective that individual consultations provide that singularly important opportunity for learning conversations that centre on the learner's pragmatic needs. Woodward Kron (2007) argues specifically in the context of NESB students at the postgraduate level that the individual one-on-one consultation provides a forum in which students can clarify meaning beyond the surface-level errors and are engaged in interacting and negotiating texts in complex ways. This is an important step in knowledge production. It also allows for an interaction between learning support staff and the student that might minimise the sense of isolation that many distance learners feel, contributing to retaining the student and sustaining them in their learning endeavours. It is this elusive but very important feeling that over a period of time nurtures a sense of inclusion in an ODL environment. In doing so, it would provide interpersonal contact that is likely to provide learning support, "in the terms in which those learners wish to express themselves" (Thorpe, 2003, p. 203)

It must be acknowledged, though, that the shift from the face-to-face to the ODL context has only been recent for many learning support staff. As a profession, we are still trying to grapple with ways of dealing with effective pedagogy and protocols to enhance learning using this approach. The opportunities exist in terms of technology, and perhaps, even the goodwill of faculties can be counted on. Nonetheless, this form of online support may not be appeal to many learning advisors because of the quick response and the intensity of the feedback that it demands. Working one-on-one online can be time consuming. Mechanisms for giving feedback need to be explored so as to minimise the disadvantages such as expenses involved in providing such an "inclusive" student-centred practice.

## 4 Conclusion

From the perspective of inclusivity in higher education, and specifically with regard to equitable access to academic learning support services, this paper has reviewed the literature on ODL. In the present paper, we have interpreted the term "inclusivity" to understand greater access and support to students undertaking higher education in an ODL context. In order to explore ways of enabling greater access and timely support, we have explored the literature on online distance education to uncover how academic support services are envisioned in the literature. We have suggested that the face-to-face modes of delivery could be, with modifications, transferred to the online context as indicated by Hicks et al (2001). However, we propose that both proactive and reactive and both developmental and remedial measures are necessary to create an inclusive learning environment by urging that on-line one-on-one consultation be recognised and included in the repertoire of strategies to provide academic learning support. We acknowledge that there are implications for making the practice fit the online environment; valuing this mode of learning could be a step in the direction of enhancing inclusivity.

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